

LUCY CALKINS



TEACHING WRITING

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To my colleagues—past and present—at TCRWP; you help me see more, learn more, teach more, be more, and I am forever grateful.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
CHAPTER 1 Writing Workshop: The Backstory	1
CHAPTER 2 What Writers Need: Essentials of Writing Workshop	9
CHAPTER 3 The Writing Process	27
CHAPTER 4 The Big Picture of Writing Workshop	55
CHAPTER 5 Narrative Writing	81
CHAPTER 6 Information Writing	95
CHAPTER 7 Opinion/Argument Writing	107
CHAPTER 8 Conferring with Writers	123
CHAPTER 9 Small-Group Work in the Writing Workshop	141
CHAPTER 10 Writing across the Curriculum	159
CHAPTER 11 Assessing Writing	173
CHAPTER 12 Bringing the Writing Workshop to Your School	193
WORKS CITED	201
INDEX	205

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CHAPTER 1

Writing Workshop

The Backstory

THIS WILL BE A BRIEF BOOK on the teaching of writing, one that I hope you can read on the fly, in today's grab-and-go world. But I can't help you teach writing well without building a relationship with you. In the end, teaching writing is deeply personal. Helping someone write well and helping someone teach writing well both require a relationship of trust.

I want to introduce myself by letting you know that I've been at this work for a long time, since the field's beginnings, really. It happened serendipitously, as life often does.

The Invention of Writing Process Instruction: My Early Story

As a youngster, I longed to find a way to make a difference in the world. That led me to tutor kids in a settlement house near the Bethlehem Steel plant on the shores of Lake Erie, working under the leadership of my church's youth pastor, a man named Donald Graves, a man who went on to become a great leader in the field of teaching writing.

So I grew up to be a teacher, and I taught and learned in some amazing schools, including the British primary schools—a highly renowned system at the time. I couldn't keep all I was learning to myself, so I began writing articles for educational journals. Writing led me to read *A Writer Teaches Writing* by another Don—Don Murray (who won the Pulitzer Prize for his work at the *Boston Herald*). I was enthralled by his book about the writing process. I used that book not only to improve my own writing, but also to transform my own elementary school classroom into a very early iteration of a writing workshop. The work my students did in that early form of writing workshop further fueled my own writing. Soon, I was published enough that when I attended conferences people would read my name tag and be startled that I was only in my twenties; they told me they had seen my name on so many articles about teaching writing that they had imagined “Lucy Calkins” would be an elderly Southern woman. (Why “Southern,” no one explained!)

After several years, I finally gathered my courage and wrote to Don Murray himself to tell him how his ideas had inspired my teaching. Then the great miracle of my life happened: Don Murray took me under his wing and began coaching me in writing.

Meanwhile, by some strange twist of fate, Don Graves, my former pastor, became a professor of education at the University of New Hampshire—the very same university where Don Murray, my writing mentor, now worked as a professor and as a researcher of the writing process.

The two Dons were now colleagues. Murray's work was generating a great deal of excitement and it would lead to a large-scale, national reform of college writing and composition courses. Graves's work was also generating interest, and he was awarded the National Institute of Education's first major grant to study writing development in children. I was at the intersection of these two great men at this critical time in their work. I moved to New Hampshire,

became a researcher with Don Graves on the NIE study, and formalized my apprenticeship with Murray.

To launch the study, Graves and I (with a research assistant, Susan Sowers) set out to observe ten youngsters and their writing every day for two years. Our rapt attention to kids' thinking and writing was contagious, and a community of teacher-researchers formed at Atkinson Elementary School in New Hampshire. We all wrote constantly, sending research articles into the world like postcards from a journey.

That writing caught the attention of the field, and people started to explore and think of the teaching of writing differently. Because we were trying to be writers ourselves (and were being coached in writing by Donald Murray), we had an up-close involvement with the burgeoning research on methods of teaching adult writers. That had special relevance to our work with the case-study students, because we talked a lot at the time about inviting kids to take up the strategies that “real writers” use. We cited Jerome Bruner, who wrote:



The foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form. (*The Process of Education*)

In a word, the best introduction to a subject is the subject itself. (*Toward a Theory of Instruction*)

It's not accidental, then, that many of the methods that eventually took hold during that research study were transplanted from the work that Don Murray was doing with adult writers.

My first book was called *Lessons from a Child*. The title conveys something about the groundbreaking nature of that early work. We were studying children's writing and also, almost inadvertently, developing an entirely new image of writing instruction for young children. Interestingly, we found that

there is only a thin line between *researching* young writers and *teaching* young writers. Questions that we asked as researchers, questions such as “What are you working on as a writer? Can you show me where you have tried that?” and “So do you think this is your best work, or is it in between, or not so good? What would you do to make this your best work?” turned out to have enormous teaching power. I remember the day, back then, when a superintendent introduced me to someone as the author of *Lessons for a Child*. At that moment, I flashed on the gap between that title and the actual title—*Lessons from a Child*—and thought, “Therein lies the story of what we have learned.”



What we learned was that listening to children, studying their work and processes, could teach us a universe of lessons about good writing—and about good teaching.

The stream of publications about our research created a stir in the larger field of education. It was no small thing for teachers to transform one chunk of the school day into a time in which kids pursued their own

important projects, made choices, interacted with tools and each other with agency and self-direction. It was no small thing for teachers to teach in ways outside the norms of American education.

It wasn't the content of our publications, alone, that made a difference. Until then, most educational research had been dry and voiceless. Our writing, on the other hand, brimmed with the faces and voices of youngsters—probably in part because Don Graves had come into this work from a career as a pastor and because our work was schooled by a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, but also because the voices of the children we were studying became vibrant, quirky, and idiosyncratic as those kids came into their own as young writers themselves. Our research articles brimmed with stories in ways that didn't fit the existing norms of academic scholarship—and the work spoke to readers in new ways.

Soon, visitors were pouring into that little clapboard schoolhouse in Atkinson where we were studying Susie Sible, Birger Dahl, John Masse, and

all the other children. Graves and I were speaking at national conferences. This new approach to the teaching of writing swept the globe, an approach that was built upon a foundation of responsive listening.

So that's the story of how I came to be at the forefront of the teaching of writing. Much of what we today take for granted in the teaching of writing began during that research, and flourished in the subsequent years when both Graves and I published books—via the newly formed press, Heinemann—about what we'd learned. Today's understanding of terms such as *writing workshop*, *writing process*, *writing folders*, *rehearsal*, *minilessons*, *conferring*, *peer-conferring*, and *share meetings* all started then.

More importantly, it was that early work that launched some of the big ideas that are still foundational to the teaching of writing today—for example, the idea that even young kids benefit from writing workshops that are predictable, and framed by a minilesson that sets kids up to write for an extended time, and, after a long interval for writing, by an opportunity to share with a peer or learn from a classmate's work. The idea of “Small Moment” stories took hold then as well. If your teaching carries the belief that it's important for kids to choose their own topics, when possible, and to write about things that matter to them, using the same writing strategies that adult writers use, then your teaching has within it the DNA of that early research.

Because that is my history, this book and all of the curriculum that I help develop will carry the DNA of that initial research as well. But both this book and the Units of Study in Opinion/Argument, Information, and Narrative Writing series also draw on more than three decades of work since then.

From Research to Practice: How the TCRWP Has Brought Writing Workshop to the Nation

My hope, you'll recall, is that this section of the book functions as a bid for your trust. I'm clear that teachers, like investors, need to be critical consumers of educational proposals, looking every educational gift horse in the mouth. I've often told school leaders that they can learn from Warren Buffett, the great investor, who has said, “The secret of my success is my ability to say no. I look at investment proposals and I say, ‘No,’ ‘No,’ ‘No,’ ‘No,’ and then one proposal comes along and I say, ‘Yes.’ And one yes can take you very far.” Because this is a bid for your trust, I need to summarize not only the origins of this work, but also the journey since then.

When writing workshop was still a revolutionary idea, the only people who taught writing were brave pioneers who worked against the stream because they *believed* in the power of writing. The writing workshop was a special time, cordoned off from the normal comings and goings of school, when we'd invite kids to bring their whole selves to the classroom. We asked kids to be vulnerable and open, and we were that as well. Something happened in those classrooms. Kids were fully present, in their quirky idiosyncratic darling ways, and we found ourselves wiping away the tears.

The YouTube clip, *Dancing Guy*, featured in Derek Sivers's short TED talk on leadership, can be regarded as a metaphor for what happened next in our field. The film begins with a lone nut dancing shirtless in a field full of onlookers. The dancer is having a jolly time of it; the people seated all over



the meadow succeed in mostly ignoring him. A second fellow joins the first, and the two of them swing each other about, gesturing for others to join the fun. For a time, it is just the two of them, then a third and then a fourth dancer join in. Within moments, ten more join; now the dancers are the center of everyone's attention. Again they dance with delight, gesturing to others to join. Miraculously,

within almost no time, the entire field is dancing. When I wrote *The Art of Teaching Writing*, it was only the lone pioneers who were willing to teach against the current. "Our kids can do more than you ever dreamt possible," was our mantra. For a time, those who taught writing workshop were like that lone, shirtless nut, dancing with delight while others ignored us. Now it seems as if everyone is dancing.

The truth isn't actually that simple, because over all those years, the writing workshop approach itself has evolved. The organization I lead, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, has been at the forefront of those changes. There are about eighty of us who work full-time at the Project, and our job is to help schools around the globe adopt a reading and writing workshop

approach in ways that allow kids to become flexible, proficient, and caring writers and readers. Because we are deeply embedded in the details of schools while also being a university-based think tank, consuming and producing research alongside other scholars, we're positioned to be especially effective innovators. Our school-based efforts fuel our new initiatives. Every Thursday our entire team studies together in a continual cycle of research, curriculum development, and practice. We also have a staff of researchers and writers who join TCRWP leaders in that cycle of studying our data and learning from results. Every year a virtual Who's Who of Literacy Educators join us, and we have grown from relationships with those national colleagues, as well as from the intellectual giants who are (or have been) our university colleagues: Marjorie Siegel, Tom Sobol, Maxine Greene, Linda Darling-Hammond, Lynn Kagan, and so many others.

Of course, we especially learn from our shoulder-to-shoulder work with teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators. Most of our partnerships with schools are long-term, so we are deeply involved in an effort to help schools go from good to great. Many of TCRWP's partner schools receive recognition as Best in State, Blue Ribbon Schools, or Break the Odds schools and become model sites for their corner of the country or world.

We often work with coalitions of educators from across different schools. For example, a group of teachers from a collection of schools have been helping us develop libraries of Spanish books, while others have helped us build crosswalks between the writing workshop and high-stakes tests in various states. We've also worked with coalitions of teachers to develop toolkits to support small-group instruction, to develop ways in which the reading and writing workshop can support culturally relevant pedagogy, to explore digital literacy. The knowledge and tools developed in these think tanks enrich the entire TCRWP community. Thousands of schools participate in this learning community remotely, with more than 60,000 teachers and school leaders



participating in the idea exchange that occurs every day through our vitally active Facebook pages.

The numbers are big, but the work is intimate, intensive, personal, and long term. For me, it is a source of great pride that we've continued, for decades, to nurture so many working relationships, and to be the most influential provider of literacy professional development in New York City. In most urban areas, curriculum is marked by churn; usually one panacea after another and one partnership after another is adopted, then discarded. It goes without



saying that the fact that we've remained the leading partner for decades in New York City, is evidence that students, parents, teachers, and leaders experience the continuing effectiveness of these methods. It's also evidence that the workshop approach to teaching writing (and reading) has been successful at evolving in ways that take into account the new realities and demands of the education world. Over

time, these methods have morphed to incorporate the wisdom embedded in teacher effectiveness rubrics, in UDL, in Depth of Knowledge, in culturally responsive pedagogy. And yes, the writing workshop supports students in achieving on high-stakes tests.

Although it is traditional to acknowledge one's contributors in an acknowledgments section, I cite our partner schools in this chapter, as this bid for your trust gains strength because of contributions from powerful, brave, inventive educators who are as much a part of our organization as any of us. Many of the ideas and methods that I'll share in this book were developed as we thought and taught in the company of principals, teachers, and children in the schools in which we work. My colleagues and I follow in the tradition of Johnny Appleseed, collecting seeds of new thinking from one nook and cranny of this giant worldwide community, and carrying those seeds to other far-flung spots where the ideas take root and grow. The resulting fields of beauty everywhere take my breath away. I hope to do justice to all of this in the pages that follow.